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Getting Our Priorities Straight in Higher Education

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Everybody talks about saving the world. Some people actually try. And some actually succeed.

One of Sacred Heart University's 2012 graduates is a young woman who I would include among those who have genuinely made a difference, who have — in the hackneyed phrase we love to use — 'made the world a better place.'

It started when she was in high school and made her first momentous trip to Kenya as part of a service mission. After that, she worked with organizations in Mexico, El Salvador, India and Morocco.

During the summer of 2010, she returned to Kenya to volunteer at an orphanage outside of Nairobi, where she uncovered abuse. Among the worst atrocities, a three-year-old boy had been beaten so badly his femur was broken.

Eventually, she and her colleagues exposed the corrupt practices at the orphanage and helped the children leave so they could enroll in a safe boarding school. This experience inspired her to form a foundation with the goal of providing funding for children to attend schools up to the university level.

That's surely one of the noblest causes I can think of, and it was undertaken by a recent Sacred Heart graduate.

However, idealism like that is endangered. It's endangered by President Obama's much-praised initiative to control college costs, which is built on a formula that will reward schools whose graduates make the most money.

It's tough to get rich saving the world, and graduates committed to social justice have a hard time competing in earned income with their counterparts who study, say, engineering, math and computer science.

Let's start with some basic facts: Federal student loan debt is more than \$1 trillion, and 37 million Americans are paying back student loans. During recent months, Congress, in fits and starts, has struggled to address the issue with a short-term approach. At one point, the rates on Stafford student loans doubled to 6.8 percent, but a few weeks later, Congress returned it to 3.8 percent, while linking the rate to 10-year U.S. Treasury notes.

Then, President Obama took up the mantle and in a much-publicized initiative, he declared war on college costs. Under the Obama scheme, colleges will be ranked by several factors, including tuition, their percentage of lower-income students, affordability, graduation rates and earnings of graduates. Student aid will be tied to the rankings, which will be announced in 2015. As a result, colleges will be compared with one another, and the underperformers will lose out on federal student aid.

While editorial writers generally favored the plan (after all, who's opposed to keeping down college costs?) it sacrifices the value of a liberal arts education for more mercenary concerns. Ranking schools this way, in effect, punishes them by controlling the distribution of student aid.

This formula also presents a very real problem for schools that combine education with a strong emphasis on social missions and for those who graduate thinking goals like "changing the world" and "working for social justice" are laudable and should be emphasized as much as, if not more than, an \$80,000 salary upon graduation. Students interested in public service discover very early that the rewards don't come in the paycheck, but that's a lesson the Obama Administration has yet to learn.

Ranking schools by the earning levels of their graduates is contrary to the mission of many colleges and universities. Our culture is increasingly emphasizing skills training over liberal arts, which is understandable because not everyone is meant to study

literature, philosophy, art and history. At the same time, not everyone is meant to study finance and engineering.

And while many liberal arts schools also have a vocational component, such as nursing, education and business, it is crucial to remember that a salary cannot be the only barometer of a successful education. Higher education is not just about the schools. It is about the individuals and what society needs to flourish, prosper and grow.

We've entered a new and perilous era when the schools that try to inspire students to a higher calling will be penalized by federal aid distribution. The government's formula discounts the personal development of the individual and the need for social consciousness. It insults the liberal arts and rewards trade schools where richness of cultures, literature and creativity are virtually ignored. The addendum is there will be increasing pressure on colleges to scrap liberal arts programs and eviscerate the curriculum in favor of skills-based study. Equally frightening, some small independent colleges that produce teachers, clergy and social workers will face the prospect of having to close.

I have to ask myself, would the world be a better place if our young graduate had gone into investment banking? And should schools that promote social justice be penalized? I think not.